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ABSTRACT

The essential elements of middle school education are defined in this position paper. After a brief introduction, the pamphlet describes middle schools' rationale, which is based on the uniqueness of "transescence," the period from age 10 to 14 when children are making the transition from childhood to full adolescence. The major physical, social, emotional, social-emotional, and intellectual characteristics of transescent youth are listed. Next the authors enumerate 10 essential elements of a "true" middle school, including educators knowledgeable about and committed to transescents, a balanced curriculum based on transescent needs, a range of organizational arrangements, varied instructional strategies, a full exploratory program, comprehensive advising and counseling, continuous progress for students, evaluation procedures compatible with transescent needs, cooperative planning, and a positive school climate. A brief statement in the pamphlet's final section summarizes the paper. (RW)

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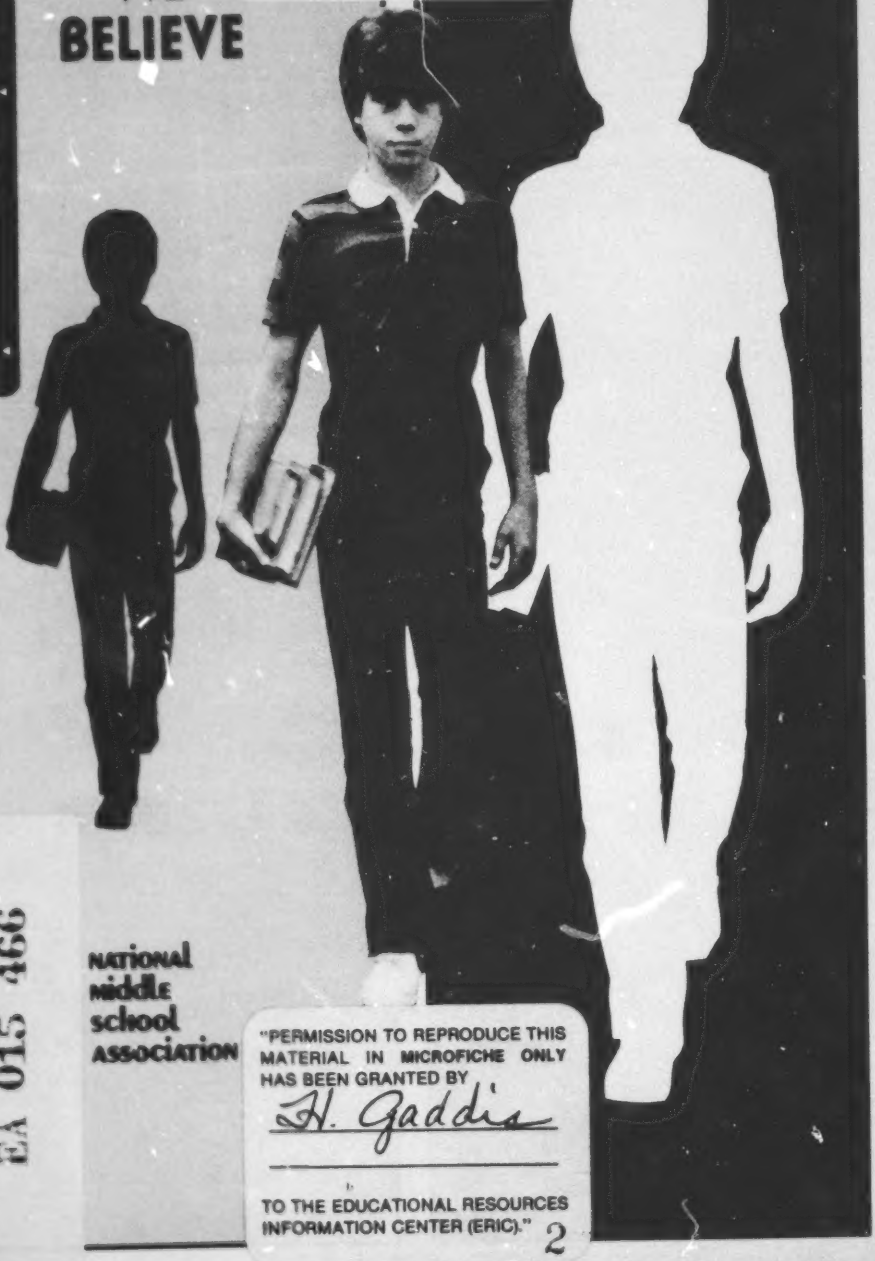

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Alfred A. Arth
Committee Coordinator

William Alexander

Charles Cherry

Conrad Toepfer

Donald Eichhorn

Gordon F. Vars

John H. Lounsbury
Editor

Foreword

The primary purpose of the National Middle School Association is the promotion of middle school education. The Association has provided important leadership and given direction to the middle school movement for many years. The educational community has come to recognize the Association as a prime source of information regarding the education of the emerging adolescent.

Because the middle school concept has been implemented in a variety of different ways across the nation, the Association felt that a clear and relatively complete statement was needed which would reflect the consensus views of the Association regarding the essential elements of middle school education. During my tenure as president, I established a committee to develop such a document.

The task of consolidating in a concise statement the many volumes of material written about middle school education was a difficult one, made even more complex since members of the committee, themselves, authored many books and countless articles on this subject.

The committee initially met in St. Louis for two days of intense discussion. At this meeting major points were agreed on and procedures for writing the paper were established. Over the next few months members of the committee exchanged preliminary drafts. The committee submitted a full draft to the NMSA Board of Directors. The Board approved the basic concepts and authorized final editing in preparation for publication.

On behalf of the National Middle School Association, I would like to acknowledge with appreciation the committee members for their professional contribution to this paper:

Dr. William Alexander
Dr. Alfred A. Arth, Coordinator
Mr. Charles Cherry
Dr. Donald Eichhorn
Dr. Conrad Toepfer
Dr. Gordon F. Vars

I would also like to give recognition to Dr. John H. Lounsbury who edited the entire document and was responsible for the production of the position paper in monograph form.

John Swaim
Past President
National Middle School Association

Introduction

In the nearly ninety year history that spans intermediate education in the United States, many statements have been formulated which sought to crystallize the educational beliefs inherent in the effort to establish a middle level of education. There is not now, however, one comprehensive consensus statement which middle school workers can utilize in establishing or improving programs. Recognizing this lack, the National Middle School Association appointed a committee to prepare a position paper. After a considerable period of discussion, writing, rewriting, and editing the Board of Directors adopted this paper and recommended its distribution to the profession and to the public at large.

The Committee believed, and the Board concurred, that at this time middle schools needed a degree of specificity regarding the educational characteristics that, in toto, comprise what has come to be recognized as the "middle school concept." While anxious to avoid being too prescriptive or inserting a degree of rigidity in middle school education, the National Middle School Association believes that the middle school concept *is* the embodiment of valid educational ideals, ones which emerge from the nature and needs of the age group to be served, and that those ideals provide clear direction for the needed educational program. By setting forth the rationale and definition of middle schooling in this paper, the Association believes it will contribute to the advancement of efforts to provide the best possible education for the youth of America, particularly the twenty million of them enrolled in the middle school years.

I.

The Rationale of the Middle School

Each age or developmental level has particular characteristics which might seem to warrant the label of unique, but no other age level has so clear and legitimate a claim to the designation of unique as does this period of transition between childhood and full-blown adolescence, roughly ages ten to fourteen. During this phase of life, dramatic and far reaching changes occur in every aspect of one's being. While the physical changes are most obvious, they are accompanied by equally influential but less obvious changes in the social, emotional, and intellectual make-up of individuals. The trauma of pubescent metamorphosis is complicated further by the wide range in both the time that these changes begin and in the rate at which they develop in individuals. For instance, girls mature one and a half to two years earlier than boys, *but* some boys reach pubescence before some girls do. At no other time of life are the differences between individuals so great. Individuals of the same age may well vary two feet in height and a hundred pounds in weight with comparable differences in intellectual and social development.

Middle school education is founded in these realities of human development and the allied principles of learning. While administrative organization inevitably comes into the picture, middle schooling is *not* primarily concerned with grade levels or related administrative arrangements. The history of the junior high school and even the early history of the middle school indicate clearly that a title or grade level designation without a focus on the needs of the learners to be served, does not make for an effective school.

The challenge of middle school education, then, is to develop an educational program that is based on the needs and characteristics of a most diverse and varied population.

The extent of this challenge can only become apparent when one considers carefully the nature of middle school students. And as middle school advocates have attempted to come to grips with the realities of this stage of development and the inherent educational implications, they have been handicapped by a serious lack of understanding of this period of life among the general public and even within the profession. It is for this reason that a major and an integral part of this paper is a rather comprehensive description of boys and girls of middle school age, about ten to fourteen.

This age level has lacked an identity, due, in part at least, to the lack of an appropriate label. For too many years we have had to use such double and nonspecific terms as young adolescent, early adolescent, late childhood and pre-adolescent, or emerging adolescent. The language simply did not contain a word to identify this period of transition until Eichhorn, in 1966, coined the term, "transescence." He defined it as follows:

> The stage of development which begins prior to the onset of puberty and extends through the early stages of adolescence. Since puberty does not occur for all precisely at the same chronological age in human development, the transescent designation is based upon the many physical, social, emotional, and intellectual changes that appear prior to the puberty cycle to the time in which the body gains a practical degree of stabilization over these complex pubescent changes.

The words *transescent* and *transescence* will be used, though not exclusively, throughout this paper. The range of transescence is generally from ages 10 to 14, but in some instances even outside those years. Evidences of puberty are found for some in the fifth grade or even earlier, while some others cannot be considered fully adolescent until the end of the ninth grade or even later. In terms of present medical research findings, however, the vast majority of transescents are contained in grades six through eight.

The degree to which an individual is advanced, on-track, or delayed in his physical growth and mental/social/emotional development during transescent is a matter of intense concern to that individual. Early or late maturation in both boys and girls is likely to result in personality adjustments that continue into adult life. Because of the wide variability of the time and rate of pubertal development, grouping by grades is undesirable. Developmental age grouping is a far more valid alternative to the graded construct which has dominated all American education for over a century.

Developmental age specifies readiness for learning experiences based upon characteristics displayed by the learner irrespective of chronological age. It is based upon the display of specific characteristics and allows for a wide range of chronological age among youngsters displaying those characteristics.

Major characteristics of transescent youth, with some indication of their effect, are set forth in the following sections. The characteristics describe frequent and usual behavior exhibited by most boys and girls in this age group. They should not be regarded as norms for all. Each transescent is unique, and he or she may differ from others in regard to some characteristics and still be expected to achieve normal adolescence, youth, and adulthood.

1. **Physical Characteristics.** These are related to physical development reflecting increasing height, body breadth and depth, heart size, lung capacity, muscular strength, and sexual development.
    1. Average annual gain in weight is 8 to 10 lbs. and in height two inches. Girls are usually taller and more physically advanced than boys in the earlier stages of transescence. Interest patterns tend to follow physical change. Incommensurate growth of heart and body weight may result in functional heart murmurs. Bone growth surpasses muscle development and bones lack protection of muscles and support of tendons. This uneven bone-muscle growth facilitates physical regression in coordination and poor body mechanics during rapid growth spurt periods. Wide differences among students in prepubertal and pubescent stages of growth are obvious at given ages. Disproportionate changes in weight and muscle development result in awkwardness which is disturbing to the self-concept and self esteem of formerly coordinated youngsters.
    2. Sexual maturation is closely related to the general physical development occurring during transescence. The growth of genitalia in boys, continued breast development in girls, and the appearance of pubic hair in both boys and girls are clear indications of this development. Just as the awareness of such growth is a matter of intense concern for some, so is the lack of it a concern for others. The cultural models of physical attractiveness upset both boys and girls developing outside such near-perfect norms.
    3. Extreme restlessness and alternating periods of almost hyperactivity and fatigue reflect variations in basal metabolic rates. Daily needs for release of energy and periods in which alteration in blood sugar stability requires nutritional breaks characterize this age. Overexertion may result in chronic fatigue. Ossification of cartilage in epiphysial areas of the skeleton makes sitting in hard-surfaced chairs extremely uncomfortable and is one of the reasons for the "ants-in-the-pants, can't-sit-still" problems of this age.
    4. Overtaxing of digestive system with large quantities of poorly selected foods is a normal experimental activity at this age.

5. Concern with appearance reflects peer and "pop" fads and experimentation with styles created by media and economic pressure groups. Students may feel extremely sensitive over acne, moles or birthmarks, and personal body development that may be out of the norm depicted in advertising.

2. **Social Characteristics.** These are related to socialization needs realized as transescents broaden their base of affiliation from family to peer group. Opportunities for students to interact both with peers and with adults (significant others) in non-instructional areas assumes increasing importance at this age level.
    1. Turmoil often develops as family allegiances diminish and peer allegiances become stronger. Transfer to rather uncompromising peer group authority is accepted while family norms may be devalued, although not without misgivings. Transescents desire to make personal choices, but final authority continues to reside in family and other adult bases.
    2. The desire for social acceptance leads to attempts to become effectively gregarious. Efforts are made to gain acceptance by sub-groups with whose standards they wish to conform. Individuality is surrendered in a desire to be accepted. While heterosexual relations grow during transescence, same sex affiliations dominate. Rapid shifts in interests develop along with striking individual differences. Girls often enter a phase where they emulate boys, but are despised by boys because they threaten them.
    3. Transescent group loyalty carries out group will with indifference and sometimes cruelty to outsiders. Conformity to the group in terms of mannerisms, dress, speech and behavior often runs counter to social expectations of adults.
    4. Transescents vacillate between their desire for regulation and direction and their demand for independence. They have a continuing need for identification with adults, but reserve the right to accept or reject adults' suggestions.
    5. Transescents are willing to work hard and sacrifice, especially if social rewards are involved. Altruism and high ideals in the search for beauty and truth are directed toward institutions such as school, community, church, and government. Concern for oppressed groups rises during these years.

3. **Emotional and Social-Emotional Characteristics.** These are related to transescent adjustment to personal growth patterns and relationships with adults. When such patterns are atypical, the emotional adjustment difficulty is intensified.
    1. The transescent now must deal with and begin to understand "shades of gray" as opposed to "black and white" choices. He is beset with conflicts within himself which are inscrutable as "self" becomes increasingly paradoxical. These

confusing responses include variations of anxiety and fear with reassuring bravado, shyness with noisiness, and over-responding with fear to respond. Standards lose earlier power because the transescent is testing the psychological confines of the adult value system. Movement into a peer group system sometimes finds diametric opposition to those former values.

2. Transescents tend to make exaggerated responses to anything with sexual implications. One's sexual development is subject to comparison with peer and media expectations, not only of body change but personal habits and practices. The need to sort fact from folklore is a continuing emotional challenge to the transescent.
3. The transescent desires attention, at times without regard to how it is secured. Threats and release of tension through emotional outbursts are episodic reflections of rapid shifts and variations of mood.
4. Instances of expressed or implied criticism from adult sources are not easily tolerated, even when they concern things the transescent is prone to criticize. Strong desires to move toward increasing levels of independence and personal decision-making contrast with felt needs for the security of adult reassurance and direction.
5. Adult standards and conventions may be ignored, ridiculed and, at times, defied at the level of family authority. Once desirous of pleasing parents and teachers, the transescent often becomes rebellious toward adults. Observable periods of irritability, distrust and suspicion convey the transescent's tendency to be easily offended and ready to believe that adults do not understand him. Often inconsiderate of others, the transescent may monopolize the family's telephone, television, bathroom, or magazines.

4. **Intellectual Characteristics.** These are related to the changes in the intellectual nature of the transescent. Initially grounded in Piagetian theory, this area has now been expanded to include consideration of the brain growth periodization data identified by Epstein.
   1. Transescents are pressured, often excessively, to succeed academically. The early stages of transescence (age 10 to 12 years) are usually characterized by success in initiating new and higher level cognitive processes because of the brain growth spurt experienced by as much as 85% to 90% of youngsters during this time. A similar percentage of 12 to 14 year olds may experience problems if expectations for continued development of higher thinking skills are held when a plateau in brain growth exists. During this span emphasis should be directed to learning new facts and information

within the profile of thinking skills initiated prior to this plateau period. This allows also for the consolidation, refinement and maturation of thinking skills previously developed.

2. Transescents are curious and enjoy both intellectual and manipulative activities appropriate to their stage of development. They prefer active involvement in learning rather than passive recipiency. Transescents are generally intellectually uninhibited and find learning most interesting when it is related to their immediate goals and interests. Transescents enjoy discussing experiences with adults. They are also able to evaluate issues critically, though not always objectively.
3. Transescents display a heightened egocentrism which is often balanced through peer interaction. They argue to clarify personal thinking as much as to convince others. Strong desires for self-expression and preferences for creative activity stem from the transescent's vivid imagination and growing interest in transposing self and others into other situations.
4. Transescents display wide ranges of skills, interests, and abilities. Slow-rate and fast-rate learners both continue to grow toward mental maturity at their own rates. Interests, attention span, and concentration alter during transescence, generally assuming shorter rather than longer periods of focus.
5. In their search for identity and a personality, learners seek to understand the meaning and enigmas of life from many aspects. They are concerned with intellectual, philosophical, biological, sociological, moral and ethical issues. They have an increased ability to see through situations and seek to find casual and correlative relationships.

II.
Defining a Middle School

If the middle school is to be an effective educational response to the varied characteristics and needs of transescent learners, it faces a demanding task. Guidelines, such as those provided in the remainder of this paper, are needed to assist in this effort.

For years there has been discussion relating to the description and definition of a middle school. Some have argued that a definition should not be formalized because this would cause a singular track of thinking and close off future development. Others have argued that the middle school concept was too important to be "set in stone" and that local initiative should be encouraged. History has demonstrated that the lack of a standard definition has not contributed to the development of superior individual middle schools. Quite the opposite is true, for the name *middle school* has been attached to almost any conceivable organizational structure and curriculum design.

A definition of the middle school has been inherent in the movement's philosophy since concerns for the education of this intermediate group were first enunciated more than eighty years ago. That definition is rooted in the commitment to organize an educational institution that truly seeks to meet the needs of youth in transition between childhood and adolescence. Stated simply, the middle school is an educational reponse to the needs and characteristics of youngsters during transescence and, as such, deals with the full range of intellectual and developmental needs. Specifics regarding grades or courses included are not fundamental to such a definition. In the following section an attempt is made to set forth the essential qualities which expand that definition.

ESSENTIAL ELEMENTS OF A "TRUE" MIDDLE SCHOOL

The middle school stands for clear educational concepts which evolve from a melding of the nature of the age group, the nature of learning, and the expectations of society. There should be, then, certain conditions, factors, and programmatic characteristics that are identifiable and that would be present in a true middle school. The components identified below, called essential elements, are considered to be of special importance. It is recognized that there are other characteristics or features that could and perhaps should be included, but these seemed to the Committee to be "essential."

(1) Educators Knowledgeable About and Committed to Transescents

The unique needs and characteristics of the middle school student dictate that a special type of educator implement the curriculum. Certainly a prerequisite for working with transescents should be a genuine desire to teach this age group. Coupled with that bent needs to be a thorough understanding of the human growth and development of the transescent, for herein is the foundation of all middle school practices.

What is normal needs to be understood. A higher degree of peer group communication should be expected, and accommodated. Emotions become more involved in daily activities, both inside and outside the classroom. The new-found ability to see multiple causes stimulates a challenge of authority that was not normal in previous years, but now is an integral and appropriate part of the inquiry method employed by the transescent. School personnel, then, must be able to distinguish the difference between a personal affront and a challenge to the establishment.

Only when personnel are cognizant of the many developmental factors in operation during transescence are they likely to understand the valid need for giving direct attention to the affective aspects of education.

(2) A Balanced Curriculum Based on Transescent Needs

The middle school curriculum itself must be formulated with regard to the educational needs and characteristics of transescent students. While societal expectations are important and tradition ought not be ignored, a true middle school curriculum will actually be based largely on transescent needs. The curriculum must carefully balance academic goals and other human development needs. A middle school cannot succeed in fulfilling its educational responsibilities if it ignores non-cognitive objectives. Indeed, it cannot succeed in fulfilling its cognitive objectives if it does not recognize the interrelated affective goals. In the middle school, the climate for learning and the instructional processes used are nearly as important as the

content itself. Both content and the student must be valued. The curriculum must emphasize both process and product. It must deal forthrightfully with the basics, but not omit aesthetics and attitudes. It must seek to increase the fund of knowledge students possess, but also recognize that continued development of the basic skills needed to acquire that knowledge is essential. The balance of humane *and* academic factors, both of which are of equal value to the success of the program, makes the middle school curriculum distinctly different from either elementary or secondary programs.

(3) A Range of Organizational Arrangements

Various organizational arrangements should be utilized within the middle school, for the students are varied. A fully departmentalized, ability grouped seven period day is incompatible with what we know about transescents and learning. It is also a prime example of the unfortunate imitation of the high school that has long plagued intermediate education. Organization should be a tool, not a master. Block scheduling, multi-age grouping, developmental age grouping, alternate schedules, and other ways of organizing for instruction belong in the middle school. A school-within-a-school arrangement may be needed, as may, on occasion, a self-contained or core situation. Homogeneous grouping may be a proper requisite for some instruction while heterogeneous grouping is best for most instruction.

All classes, in all subjects, do not need to meet the same number of periods per week for the same amount of time each week. An interdisciplinary team with a large block of time at its disposal should be in a better position to make the schedule for its students within that block than is the central administration. The staff should be free to experiment with creative ways of organizing for teaching. In schedulng, the key question is, "Who needs what math?" rather than, "When will we teach math?"

There are, of course, advantages and disadvantages to any instructioanl grouping pattern. No one arrangement is "best" or "right," and a middle school should employ varied organizational arrangements. The primary concern should always be that the pattern employed enhance the learning experiences of the students.

(4) Varied Instructional Strategies

The unique characteristics of transescents provide a foundation for instructional methods, just as they do for curriculum content. The skills and achievement levels of middle school students are distributed across a very broad continuum. Students experience plateaus, rapid progress, and regression in physical coordination and skill achievement. Achievement simply does not proceed uniformly. Transescents also possess varied levels of readiness, therefore, dif-

ferent methods of instruction are needed to serve adequately the diverse levels and conditions.

The increased importance of peer relationships calls for small group methods that provide opportunities for peer interaction.

The need for individual attention which is occasioned by diverse development requires such methods as committee work, simulation, and independent study. Transescents are curious, creative, and they like to experiment. Instructional strategies which take advantage of these desirable traits are more effective.

Most students have the ability to assume considerable responsibility for their own learning and occasionally should be "set free" to do so. Learning can and does take place without a teacher present.

(5) A Full Exploratory Program

The rapid physical, social, and intellectual development which occurs during transescence requires the inclusion of brief but intense interest-based activities. A short attention span, difficulty in concentration, and the restlessness which accompanies changing physical bodies preclude learning modules which extend much beyond 15-20 minutes. Therefore, students should be involved in some units of study which meet for considerably less than an hour, less than a semester, and are tied to changing interests. Mini-courses, exploratory courses, service clubs, special interest activities, and independent study projects are among the means of providing such activities. The need for exploratory activities and an exploratory attitude, however, can and should be met within the regular course work as well.

A student may have difficulty making a choice between unknowns, therefore, controlled choices may be a necessary part of an exploratory program. But however they may be organized, high interest, short-term activities with hands-on components are called for by the nature of transescence.

(6) Comprehensive Advising and Counseling

Advisement and counseling have very special importance at the intermediate educational level. Concern over body development, the desire for social acceptance, the seemingly inevitable conflict with adult norms and expectations, the desire to try out new ideas and beliefs, and the desire to experiment with a heightened intellectual ability all point to the need for an intensive and an extensive guidance program.

The typical means of providing guidance in the junior high school was that employed in the high school, a full-time counselor for several hundred students. The middle school needs more readily available and more broadly based means of providing guidance. Each transescent learner needs an adult who knows him or her well

and is in a position to give individual attention. Therefore, the middle school should be organized so that every youngster has such an adult, one who has a special responsibility for the individual's academic and personal welfare. Home-base or advisor-advisee programs which provide the transescent with regular opportunities for interaction with a small group of peers and a caring adult fill this need. These programs involve scheduled meetings which offer opportunities for interaction that lead to increased self-awareness, the consideration of values, and the development of understandings needed to deal with various school, home, or peer related problems. The adult is in a position to make early referral to school counselors and other specialists when needed. While respecting needs for confidentiality, advisors can also provide insights for other teachers useful in planning instructional and remedial programs for individuals and groups.

(7) Continuous Progress for Students

Since growth during childhood is relatively steady and continuous, transescents may not be prepared for the growth irregularities common during the transition years. Therefore, educators and parents should reassure students that fluctuations in rate and duration of growth are normal and to be expected. This is not to excuse lack of effort on the part of the students, but to relieve the anxiety of some students who are exerting great efforts and are frustrated by their lack of accomplishment. It is crucial that they not give up or "turn off," and as a result be unable to resume progress when they reach the needed stage of maturity.

Since there are wide variations of development, each transescent must be helped to progress at his/her own rate and in accordance with the individual's preferred learning style. This requires careful and continuous assessment of learning styles and individual progress, with increasing student involvement in setting goals, determining methods of learning, and self-evaluation. Teachers' expectations of students must be responsive to individual stages of readiness during periods of growth, plateau, and regression.

Discontinuities in learning are especially evident when students transfer from one educational setting to another, such as from elementary to middle school or middle school to high school. Therefore, curriculum, guidance programs, social activities, and other aspects of education should be carefully articulated, K-12. Transescents, already highly sensitive and vulnerable because of the many changes they are experiencing personally, are especially likely to be upset by a shift from one school to another and should receive special consideration at the transition points. Staff members of affected schools must plan together and keep in touch concerning stu-

dent progress, and resist the temptation to blame student's previous teachers for any inadequacies.

While each transescent grows according to his/her own timetable, continuing interaction with peers and understanding adults is a major need. Emphasis on individual progress does not imply that students should be isolated from each other or denied continuous contact with a teacher.

(8) Evaluation Procedures Compatible with Nature of Transescents

Transescence is the crucial period in the establishment of a wholesome self-concept. Therefore, evaluation, marking, and reporting procedures should help the transescent discover and understand his strengths, weaknesses, values, interests, and personality. Emphasis must be on the positive progression, so that evaluation is self-enhancing, not demeaning. Since transescents are painfully self-conscious and sensitive to criticism, evaluation procedures must be tactful and focused on objective performance as opposed to generalizations that might reflect on the adequacy of the students as persons. Students should be involved in self-evaluation as it is another means of developing a fair and realistic self-concept.

Since peer approval is now a dominant concern, evaluation procedures should also minimize comparisons among students. Furthermore, students should be encouraged to help one another to learn and to share in the evaluation of group efforts.

Progress reports ought to reflect individual uniqueness through personal comments by both the teacher and the student, and provide opportunities for personal conferences. Both teachers and parents should emphasize those areas where growth *is* evident, perhaps in social, physical, or emotional development, and not dwell unduly on any temporary slow-down in cognitive development. Evaluation needs to be viewed as an integral phase of the entire learning process, not just something done *to* the student *by* some outside authority.

The transescent's struggle to achieve independence often leads to breakdowns in communication between students and parents. Therefore, neither educators nor parents should rely entirely on students to clarify and explain their progress in school. Instead, educators ought to initiate direct communication with parents through both face-to-face and telephone conferences and invite parents to initiate contact. Parental understanding and approval of the student's program each year is highly desirable. Wherever possible, three-way conferences of student, parent and teacher should be conducted.

(9) Cooperative Planning

The varied educational needs of transescents means that the professional "as a single runner" cannot plan adequate experiences.

Cooperative schoolwide planning that involves faculty, administration, and specialists is an essential ingredient in the effectively responsive middle school. School advisory councils involving parental and community representation are very useful.

Interdisciplinary team planning which includes teachers representing the academic areas of mathematics, English, social studies and science is central in this process. In a common planning period the interdisciplinary team can discuss the contribution each academic area will contribute to a group or to an individual student's educational program and plan accordingly. They can also combine their expertise and efforts in trying to assist individuals in adjusting to peers or meeting school demands.

The academic teams need to work cooperatively as well with the fine and practical arts team which is likely to consist of physical education, home economics, industrial arts, music and art teachers, as well as with other specialized professional personnel and administrators.

Teacher-pupil planning within the individual classroom setting is also an essential part of the total planning effort and should not be overlooked. Transescents are just beginning to learn how to make the fine discriminations that become possible with increasing abstract thinking ability. This condition calls for helping transescents develop criteria of excellence and apply them both to their own performance and that of others. To do this they must be involved actively in all phases of the learning process: selecting objectives, identifying relevant content, choosing appropriate learning activities, and evaluating outcomes.

(10) Positive School Climate

The overall climate of the school is itself a "teacher." A true middle school should evidence warmth, caring, and respect. These conditions should be apparent in the halls as well as in the classrooms, in the lunchroom as well as in the offices. The needed positive atmosphere cannot exist if it is not rooted in a sense of harmony and togetherness on the part of the professional staff. The principal, of course, is the pacesetter in generating an inviting family atmosphere. His or her attitudes and actions will be reflected in those of the faculty. A good middle school is like a good family—composed of persons of different ages, but all respected and all with particular roles and responsibilities.

Transescents, in moving swiftly toward adulthood themselves, become especially conscious of adult models. The behavior of all adults in the school provide, however unconsciously, important and quietly internalized lessons—a sort of hidden curriculum.

Interrelationship of Elements

Just as the whole is more than the sum of its parts, so an effective middle school is more than the sum of ten relatively discrete elements, no matter how essential. The school is a social organism, and each element impacts on all the others, either positively or negatively.

For example, attempts to bolster student self-concepts through appropriate methodology are undermined by marking and reporting practices that doom many students to failure. The finest curriculum accomplishes little if teachers, in their daily classroom instruction, disregard that overall design. Continuous student progress is unlikely if staff members do not make allowances for the normal spurts and plateaus of student intellectual growth. It is difficult to provide the rich array of exploratory experiences these young people need if the school is locked into a rigid schedule patterned after the high school.

And so it goes. The message is clear: a middle school must exhibit *all* of the essential elements to a considerable degree before it can claim to be effective in educating transescents. Achieving such a comprehensive task requires dedicated participation by everyone: administrators, teachers, guidance and other support personnel, students, parents, board members, and citizens of the community at large.

It is important that the total school district be involved in the planning phases. The middle school program should be developed with full consideration of the levels it bridges, and with representatives of the entire chain of elementary, middle and secondary education actively involved. Parental and general community assistance needs to be sought as well.

A representative steering committee should be established for the purpose of developing a concerned force. The total range of planning—goal setting, curriculum designing, curriculum implementation, and evaluation—should be considered when setting up the mechanisms and time schedules for preliminary planning, planning processes prior to school opening, and planning processes during operation.

No fully effective program can exist without the benefit of a written statement of goals. The clarification that develops with committing a philosophy and objectives to paper helps to identify discrepancies between needed and existing programs. The complete planning/evaluation process involves specifying the goals and objectives that a program should achieve, determining how well they are being achieved, and recommending measures that should be taken to correct identified weaknesses or omissions.

In Brief

THIS WE BELIEVE

The National Middle School Association believes that:

. . . the middle school is an educational response to the needs and characteristics of youngsters during transescence and, as such, deals with the full range of intellectual and developmental needs.

. . . young people going through the rapid growth and extensive maturation that occurs in early adolescence need an educational program that is distinctively different from either the elementary or the secondary model.

. . . existing programs for this age group have all too often lacked focus on transescent characteristics and needs.

. . . educators, school board members, parents, and citizens generally need to become more cognizant of this age group and what an effective educational program for this group requires.

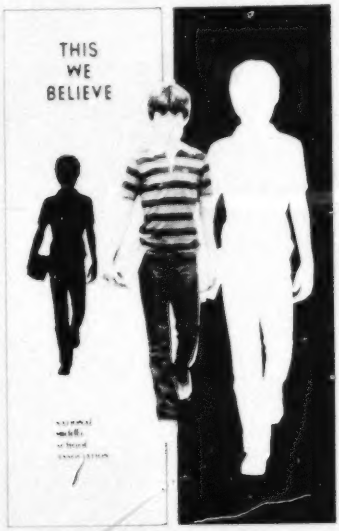
. . . no other age level is of more enduring importance because the determinants of one's behavior as an adult, self-concept, learning interests and skills, and values largely are formed in this period of life.

. . . the developmental diversity of this age group makes it especially difficult to organize an educational program that adequately meets the needs of all.

. . . the academic needs of middle school students are affected greatly by their physical, social, and emotional needs which also must be addressed directly in the school program.

A "true" middle school will evidence the following conditions or characteristics, called essential elements:

1. Educators Knowledgeable About and Committed to Transescents
2. A Balanced Curriculum Based on Transescent Needs
3. A Range of Organizational Arrangements
4. Varied Instructional Strategies
5. A Full Exploratory Program
6. Comprehensive Advising and Counseling
7. Continuous Progress for Students
8. Evaluation Procedures Compatible With Transescent Needs
9. Cooperative Planning
10. Positive School Climate



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